DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 784 FL 025 585

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TITLE Simulation and Collaborative Learning in Political Science and Sociology Classrooms.
PUB DATE 1998-01-31
NOTE 5p.; In: The Japan Conference on English for Specific Purposes Proceedings (Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima, Japan, November 8, 1997); see FL 025 575.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Mediated Communication; *Cooperative Learning; Course Descriptions; *English for Academic Purposes; *English for Special Purposes; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Language of Instruction; Newsletters; Political Science; Programming; Research Skills; Second Language Instruction; *Simulation; Sociology; *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS Content Area Teaching; Japanese People; Web Sites

ABSTRACT

The program described here used cooperative, content-based computer writing projects to teach Japanese students at an intermediate level of English proficiency enrolled in first-year, English-language courses in political science/environmental issues and sociology/environmental issues in an international college program. The approach was taken to make the content accessible to students with inadequate English language skills and to narrow course content to the key concepts while building those skills. Because the content of the courses overlapped considerably, the teachers collaborated. The final class writing assignment was development of a newsletter or Web site reflecting the styles of writing found in those of environmental interest groups. Pre-writing activities helped students identify environmental problems to target, simulate formation of interest groups, and gather related information. The groups then created documents and sent electronic mail. The project served as a natural vehicle for collaborative work, developed both receptive and productive language skills, supported development of research skills, provided real-world experience and exposure to authentic materials, and taught computer-related techniques such as creation of graphics and varied text types. Contains 3 references. (MSE)

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ED 424 784

Simulation and Collaborative Learning in Political Science and Sociology Classrooms

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Introducation

Collaborative, content-based, computer writing projects can prove highly motivating for students. They can also enhance genuine and effective cooperation and interaction between students, between students and teachers, and even, via the Internet, between students and others around the world. Simultaneously, such projects provide a concrete, focused means of allowing students to gain and reinforce knowledge of a content subject, hone critical thinking skills, and develop writing, editing, and computer skills. Students develop new and authentic ways of interacting with information as they read and react to texts and then assimilate their structure, style, and rhetorical modes in creating new texts of their own to communicate what they have learned.

The Context

In the project described below, Japanese students at an intermediate level of English proficiency were enrolled in either a first year political science/environmental issues or a sociology/environmental issues course being co-taught at an international college by English-speaking professors and ESL instructors. Approximately three hours a week was devoted to instruction in the content subject, and three hours per week was devoted to the development of English skills (primarily in the computer lab) with all instruction being based around activities designed to help students master and reinforce their knowledge of the discipline being studied.

Since students with a proficiency in English far below that normally required for college courses had been allowed to enroll, the instructors grappled with how to make the content accessible as well as how to narrow the focus of the course to those concepts truly essential for an understanding of the key concepts while simultaneously helping students to build their vocabulary and develop reading and writing skills. This project attempted to meet these needs.

Rationale for a Joint Project

The content of the two courses overlapped a great deal. The sociology professor continually emphasized how environmental problems affected various segments of society and vice versa. Whereas in a case of, say, water pollution, a chemist would be interested in the specific toxins, a biologist in which plants and animals had died, and a doctor in the effects of mercury poisoning on the human body, the sociology professor had a broader goal. He wanted students to understand not only these basic cause/effect relationships but also how environmental damage affected people's lives (for example, their ability to earn an income or their standing within the community). Conversely, he also focused on the effects of society on the environment (for example, how social structures and values of a particular group – say those of post-WWII Japanese bureaucrats and corporate executives– might allow prolonged damage to the environment unfettered by legislative restraint). Such concerns naturally overlapped with the issues in political science where the professor

focused on how environmentalists were trying to influence both legislators and those who elect them (the public at large) in the formulation of public policy. Both professors mentioned the work of interest groups and had linked numerous homesites to their own homepages (see Resources) for students to utilize in doing research about environmental problems. Many of these sites were those of environmental interest groups, and as the ESL teachers guided the students in analyzing these sites, it became clear that they contained various distinctive types of writing which could serve as effective models for the students to use in communicating their own ideas in writing. This analysis, then, became the basis of the final writing project: a newsletter or web site produced by the students themselves containing the same types of writing they were encountering on the Internet.

This kind of writing class varied from the traditional approach to writing. The focus was not on the essay, but rather on collaborative writing and the production of new types of text which reflect the tasks inherent in the study of the specific disciplines. This approach engaged the students' interests, fostered interactive learning, and motivated them to use English for communicative purposes. The project met the students specific needs to learn more in-depth about the issues they were concerned about in their studies.

Writing Tasks

Initially, pre-writing activities, such as ranking environmental problems, helped students to identify one environmental problem in which they were most interested, and six groupings of students emerged: those interested in water pollution, air pollution, nuclear issues, forest issues, population issues, and the effects of dams. Each group then simulated the forming of an interest group (with a name, mission statement and logo) which would do research and provide information to the public about its issue. Students were required to provide information describing and explaining the causes of the issue in some of the authentic forms they had seen modeled on the Internet (news briefs, press releases, short reports, statistics/fact sheets, Q and A sheets, timelines, charts, or book reviews). Students also had to include information about the results of the problem (such as case studies, personal accounts, and interviews with or reports about victims), information about public opinion/reaction to the problem (editorials, interviews with environmentalists/activists, poll results or indictments), and information regarding political action being taken (reports on legislation under consideration, interviews with politicians, descriptions of agencies/organizations and their actions, action alerts, letter campaigns, petitions, or reports about grassroots movements, protests, demonstrations, and lawsuits). Students were urged to be as creative as possible and include visuals and graphics aids.

The writing tasks served the purpose of integrating the learning of computer and language skills. After learning to create documents in Microsoft Word and to send e-mail, the students developed reading and communication skills and computer-based research skills as they gathered and shared information from Internet resources. Communication skills were also enhanced as they conducted polls and interviews (on campus and by e-mail) to get additional information for their newsletters. As they composed their documents, they developed writing skills such as summarizing, paraphrasing, reporting, and editing.

Effects on Students

The project served as a natural means for collaborative work. Students developed negotiation skills as they worked together, gathering and analyzing material to further their

understanding of how issues are interrelated in the two disciplines and making decisions about what to include in their newsletters and how to organize this material. In doing so, they became aware of the importance of working collaboratively to explore the significance of interrelated aspects and to achieve their publishing goal.

In addition, with each group focusing on only one issue each, the writing project was narrowed to a manageable task, but, in the end, multiple interconnections became apparent: that overpopulation might lead to a desire for dams or that these dams might displace yet another indigenous population or endanger species residing in a forest that would be flooded.

Another interesting phenomenon was that intially students quite honestly expressed apathy about the concerns of people experiencing problems in other places. However, before the completion of the project, there was at least partial recognition of the fact that they and others around the world shared some common concerns as, for example, when a student wrote a letter to President Ramos in the Philippines expressing concern over mercury poisoning of water similar to that in Minamata, Japan.

The development of computer writing and information-gathering skills also led to a different teacher-student relationship. Students demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility for their own learning, viewing the instructors more as consultants rather than the source of all learning. They conferenced extensively with instructors via e-mail to help clarify and organize their ideas. This provided a non-threatening way to receive on-going, timely feedback.

The option of producing a website especially enhanced students' awareness of a real audience and stimulated involvement in the simulation. One group of students, for example, decided to form an interest group focusing on environmental problems related to dams. They then posted their environmental interest newsletter on an Internet homepage, calling attention to the social problems caused by the building of dams, urging international political action to address the problems, and soliciting new members from around the world for their interest group.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, many benefits for students seemed to emerge from the project: engagement with an authentic, real-world context (the web); a genuine, authentic context for interacting, collaborating and negotiating within a group, a sense of responsibility for their own learning, a sense of teachers as consultants rather than the ultimate source of knowledge, the ability to acquire knowledge of abstract environmental issues concepts and the multiple connections between various environmental issues, an opportunity to develop computer skills in word processing (including graphs and charts), graphics design, e-mail use, and web page creation, awareness of and an ability to produce types of texts other than the traditional essay, the development of general writing skills transferable to many contexts – summarizing, paraphrasing, etc., heightened motivation, and a sense of accomplishment in producing a professional-looking document.

Resources

N. J. Vasantkumar's homepage (sociology professor):

http://www.susqu.edu/FacStaff/v/nvasantk/

Note: Click on "Environment" in the upper right-hand corner of the table.

Dana Ward's homepage (political science professor):

http://www.pitzer.edu/~dward/Homepage.html

Note: Click on "cybersurf." Then choose "Environment." "Electronic Books and Journals" also has useful general resources such as CNN Interactive, which has a regularly updated "Earth" section with current environmental news.